DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 320 836 SO 020 963

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TITLE Subliminal Advertising: Is it Still Being Taught in Advertising Programs?
PUB DATE 90
NOTE 8p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Advertising; *Consumer Protection; *Course Content; Higher Education; *Mass Media; *Persuasive Discourse; Social Science Research; Teaching Methods
IDENTIFIERS *Key (Wilson Bryan)

ABSTRACT

In 1974, 1976, and 1980 three best-selling books were published by Prentice Hall authored by Wilson Bryan Key. Key adopted the viewpoint that subliminal perception was a new phenomenon and that advertisers and advertising agencies were involved in manipulation of the public with the cooperation of the mass media. This study asks whether professors of advertising continue to explain the concept of subliminal advertising as defined by Key or others to their students, and how many class meetings are devoted to the topic. A questionnaire was mailed to 51 college professors who were asked if Key's theories were discussed in their classroom lectures. Of the 51 questionnaires mailed, 21 were returned, 14 indicated the issues were discussed, 6 explained Key's theories, and 1 indicated the topic was not discussed. The findings showed that professors in departments of advertising continue to discuss the Key's ideas but the discussion is limited to one class period or less and usually in an introductory course. (NL)

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# SUBLIMINAL ADVERTISING:

# IS IT STILL BEING TAUGHT IN ADVERTISING PROGRAMS?

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This study examines whether subliminal advertising as defined by Wilson Bryan Key or others is introduced in advertising programs. A brief follow-up to a previous study by Eric J. Zanot and Lynda M. Maddox, this study's findings are similar: most professors teaching in advertising programs do acquaint students to subliminal advertising.

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## Introduction

Subliminal perception and research concerning its effects are almost 100 years old. Even so, Wilson Bryan Key, in three best-selling books,[1] writes from the perspective that the concept is new and worse that advertisers and their advertising agencies are involved in some sort of conspiracy. Furthermore, he claims that even "our so-called educational institutions, like our news and information sources, have unpardonably failed to alert us to what has been going on in the mass media..."[2]

In 1983, Eric J. Zanot and Lynda M. Maddox, in their article "Subliminal Advertising and Education," showed that Key's assertion was incorrect. Indeed, as Zanot and Maddox writes, "Professors of advertising...are fully cognizant of the concept of subliminal advertising and teach it in their classes."[3] Zanot and Maddox also reported that students were exposed to the concept in courses other than those offered by the departments of journalism, marketing, and advertising.

However, since the assertion by Key appeared in 1973 and since the article by Zanot and Maddox appeared 10 years later, the question arises, "Are professors of advertising still discussing the concept?" After all, the last book by Key that had any consequence appeared in 1980.

## Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to determine whether professors of

advertising are still explaining the concept of subliminal perception as defined by Key or others to their students and, if so, to indicate the number of class meetings that are devoted to the topic.

## Methodology

A list of every known university having a program in advertising was compiled from the following sources: Where Shall I Go to College to Study Advertising? (1989 edition) edited by Billy I. Ross, Journalism Career and Scholarship Guide--1989, and the College Blue Book (the latest edition). A random sample was developed from this list. Questionnaires containing close-ended and open-ended questions, together with a cover letter and a stamped, addressed return envelope were mailed to 51 professors of advertising. One was returned because the professor had moved.

## Results

### The Teaching of Subliminal Advertising As Defined by Key

Although 26 of the questionnaires were returned, only 21 (80.7%) professors responded to the question concerning whether the ideas of Wilson Bryan Key or subliminal messages as defined by Key were explained to their students. Fourteen (66.6%) of the 21 indicated that the issues were indeed discussed. Six (28.5%) reported they explained Key's theories, if asked by students, while one (4.7%) indicated that the ideas were not discussed.

Respondents were then asked to indicate the number of class periods they devoted to this topic. Twenty-three of the 26 professors responded.

Eighteen (78.2%) of the 23 reported that they spent one meeting or less. Five (21.7%) indicated they did not devote any time to the subject.

Respondents were asked to report the course or courses in which the topic was introduced. Sixteen wrote "Principles of Advertising," while two wrote "Copy and Layout." Each of the following was mentioned once: "Advertising I," "Advertising II," "Persuasion," "Consumer Behavior," "Advertising and Society," and "Advertising Seminar." It should be noted that several professors mentioned more than one course. (See Table 1.)

The Teaching of Subliminal Advertising as Defined by Others

There were 22 professors who responded to the question concerning whether ideas of subliminal messages as defined by others were explained to their students. Eleven (50%) indicated that ideas other than Key's were indeed discussed. Seven (31.8%) reported that these theories were discussed, if asked by students, while 4 (18%) indicated that such ideas were not mentioned.

As to how many class periods were devoted to these ideas, 12 (57.1%) reported less than one meeting. Nine (42.8%) indicated they did not spend any class time.

Respondents were asked to indicate whose ideas other than Key's were mentioned and in which course. Each of the following writers was mentioned once: Eric Zanot, Ernest Dichter, Vance Packard, and Pierre Martineau. Ideas or theories presented by these writers and/or others were mentioned or discussed in the "Principles of Advertising" course by at least 13 respondents. Three discussed these writers' ideas in the "Copywriting" course. Each of the following courses was mentioned once: "Persuasion,"

TABLE 2

RESPONSES TO QUESTIONS CONCERNING THE TEACHING OF SUBLIMINAL ADVERTISING AS DEFINED BY OTHERS

| Question | Response n | Response % |
|---|---|---|
| Do you explain the ideas of subliminal messages as defined by others? | | |
| Yes | 11 | 50 |
| No | 4 | 18 |
| Yes, if asked by students | 7 | 31.8 |
| If yes, in which course(s)? | | |
| Principles of Advertising | 13 | |
| Copywriting | 3 | |
| Persuasion | 1 | |
| Consumer Behavior | 1 | |
| Advertising and Society | 1 | |
| Advertising Seminar | 1 | |
| Advertising Design I | 1 | |
| Psychology of Advertising | 1 | |
| How many class periods do you devote to this topic? | | |
| Less than one meeting | 12 | 57.1 |
| One meeting | 0 | 0 |
| Two meetings | 0 | 0 |
| Three or more | 0 | 0 |
| None | 9 | 42.8 |

TABLE 1

RESPONSES TO QUESTIONS CONCERNING THE TEACHING OF SUBLIMINAL ADVERTISING AS DEFINED BY KEY

| Question | Response n | % |
|---|---|---|
| Do you explain the ideas of Wilson Bryan Key or subliminal messages as defined by Key to any of your students? | | |
| Yes | 14 | 66.6 |
| No | 1 | 4.7 |
| Yes, if asked by students | 6 | 28.5 |
| If yes, in which course(s) do you present this information? | | |
| Principles of Advertising | 16 | |
| Copy and Layout | 2 | |
| Advertising I | 1 | |
| Advertising II | 1 | |
| Persuasion | 1 | |
| Consumer Behavior | 1 | |
| Advertising and Society | 1 | |
| Advertising Seminar | 1 | |
| How many class periods do you devote to this topic? | | |
| Less than one meeting | 15 | 65.2 |
| One meeting | 3 | 13 |
| Two meetings | 0 | 0 |
| Three or more | 0 | 0 |
| None | 5 | 21.7 |

"Consumer Behavior," "Advertising and Society," "Advertising Seminar," "Advertising Design," and "Psychology of Advertising." (See Table 2.)

## Conclusions

The findings from this study indicate that professors in departments of advertising are still discussing Wilson Bryan Key's ideas or ideas by others about subliminal advertising, but that their discussions are limited to one class period or less. Furthermore, these discussions, which are for the most part raised by the professors, usually occur in the "Principles of Advertising" or introductory course.

## Endnotes

[1]See Subliminal Seduction (1974), Media Sexploitation (1976), and the Clam Plate Orgy and Other Techniques for Manipulating Your Behavior (1980), all first published by Prentice-Hall of New York.

[2]Wilson Bryan Key, Subliminal Seduction (New York: The New American Library, 1974), p. 189.

[3]Eric J. Zanot and Lynda M. Maddox, "Subliminal Advertising and Education," Journal of Marketing Education, Fall 1983, p. 16.